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ABSTRACT

This study develops a portrait of 1991 Teachers of the Year from across the country. A questionnaire sent to 50 outstanding teachers was completed by 35 teachers who provided information on the following: (1) important teacher characteristics; (2) educational background and experience; (3) important teacher tasks; (4) evaluation of their teacher education programs; and (5) reactions to current educational issues and trends. Consistent with previous findings of Shanoski and Hranitz (1989, 1990), the data indicate that Teachers of the Year are high achievers who have pursued their education beyond the bachelor's degree. Important teacher characteristics include love of children, subject matter knowledge, excellent communication skills, flexibility, and a sense of humor. Important teacher tasks emphasize the role of teacher as counselor, skilled instructor, and diagnostician. Outstanding teachers support utilization of mentors, cooperative learning, more federal support for education, teacher empowerment, special educational programs for homeless children, multicultural education, whole language programs, preschools in the public schools, federal child care and maternity leave policies, fifth-year teacher training, and mainstreaming. Studies of outstanding teachers can be utilized as a source of data to help guide educational practice and as a resource for those who make educational decisions which impact on teacher education. (LL)

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LEARNING FROM AMERICA'S BEST TEACHERS: WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

by

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Abstract

This national survey of 1991 Teachers of the Year supported previous findings of Shanoski and Hranitz (1989,1990). Results indicate that the Teachers of the Year are high achievers who have pursued their education beyond the bachelor's degree level. Teacher characteristics viewed as important are love of children, subject matter knowledge and excellent communication skills. Flexibility and a sense of humor were also identified as desirable. Important teacher tasks emphasized the role of the teacher as Counselor, Skilled Instructor and Diagnostician. Lastly, These teachers support utilization of mentors, cooperative learning, more federal support for education, teacher empowerment, special educational programs for homeless children, multicultural education, whole language, preschools in the public schools, a federal child care policy, a federal maternity leave policy, fifth-year teacher training and mainstreaming.

There are many excellent teachers in our nation's schools. Most of their work and dedication is not recognized or rewarded. Oftentimes, their creativity is stifled and their risk-taking and advocacy for children is discouraged. In addition, seldom is thought given to identifying and utilizing characteristics, background, experiences, knowledge and skills of outstanding teachers to improve pedagogy for preservice and practicing teachers or as a basis for evaluating and changing teacher education programs and practices.

An approach to research on outstanding teachers used by Shanoski and Hranitz (1989, 1990) has been to develop a portrait of Teachers of the Year. They investigated Pennsylvania Teachers of the Year for the past twenty-five years and national Teachers of the Year for the past five years. The following portrait emerged. Teachers of the Year were males and females at the elementary and secondary levels. Outstanding teachers in their studies tended to be experienced teachers who had pursued their education. The greatest number of outstanding teachers had taught between fifteen and twenty years and had completed a master's degree. Several possessed a doctoral degree. The academic ability of outstanding teachers, as measured by self-reported undergraduate grade point averages, revealed that they were good students. Most Teachers of the Year had undergraduate grade point averages of 3.00 or higher. The most important characteristics that today's teachers should possess were identified as love of knowledge, loves people, excellent communication skills and enthusiasm. Teacher roles viewed as important by outstanding teachers were: teachers as Skilled Instructors, Diagnosticians and Counselors. Teachers of the Year indicated that grades, personal interviews, faculty recommendations and pre-student teaching field experiences should be utilized for admission to teacher education programs.

When asked about educational trends and issues, Teachers of the Year from across the country responded positively to: mentors, cooperative learning, more federal support for education, whole language, teacher empowerment, a federal maternal leave policy and special educational programs for homeless children. Mixed to lower ratings were given to fifth-year teacher training programs, mainstreaming, the Madeline Hunter model, the Johnson City Plan, assertive discipline,

Seventy-one percent of the respondents reported holding degrees beyond the bachelor's degree level. This figure represents 80 percent who completed a master's degree and 12 percent who earned credits beyond the master's level. In addition, two of the respondents, 8 percent, earned a doctoral degree.

An analysis of the self-reported undergraduate grade point averages revealed that 69 percent of respondents had G.P.A.s between 3.0 and 4.0. This figure included 43 percent with G.P.A.s between 3.5 and 4.0 and 26 percent with G.P.A.s between 3.0 and 3.49. An additional 17 percent reported G.P.A.s between 2.5-2.99 while 3 percent or one individual indicated a G.P.A. between 2.0-2.49. Twelve percent or four individuals did not report a G.P.A.

When asked how they would grade their teacher preparation programs, 40 percent of elementary respondents gave their programs a grade of B. An equal number of elementary respondents, 27 percent, gave their programs an A or C. One elementary respondent gave no grade. Secondary respondents gave their teacher preparation programs an almost equal number of A, B, and C grades as well as two D and one E grades. Teachers identified support, guidance, knowledge of professors and background in theory and practice as examples of strengths of their teacher preparation programs. Weaknesses were cited in various areas such as discipline, limited duration of student teaching and curriculum and strategies that were not current or practical.

The 1991 Teachers of the Year responded positively to the majority of educational trends and issues. They supported mentors, cooperative learning, more federal support for education, teacher empowerment, special educational programs for homeless children, multicultural education, whole language, preschools in the public schools, a federal child care policy, a federal maternal leave policy, fifth year teacher training and mainstreaming. Mixed to lower ratings were given to assertive discipline, the Madeline Hunter model, schools of choice and national testing of teachers.

Collectively, the 1991 Teachers of the Year viewed love of children, subject matter knowledge and flexibility as the three most important characteristics that teachers should possess. At the elementary level, the three top characteristics were love of children, flexibility, and a

national testing of teachers, a federal child care policy, schools of choice and preschools in the public schools.

When asked to grade schools locally and nationally regarding school facilities, teachers, administrators, parents and school board, respondents collectively viewed their local schools somewhat more positively than schools across the country.

The vast majority of Teachers of the Year agreed that they would encourage their children to become teachers. And lastly, most of the outstanding teachers indicated that they would become a teacher if they had it all to do over again.

Purpose of the Study. The purpose of this study was to expand on the Shanoski and Hranitz studies (1989, 1990) by developing a portrait of the 1991 Teachers of the Year from across the country. These outstanding teachers were surveyed to determine 1) important teacher characteristics, 2) the educational background and experience of outstanding teachers, 3) the most important teacher tasks, 4) how they evaluated their teacher education programs, and 5) their reaction to current educational issues and trends.

In the spring of 1991, a field-tested questionnaire was sent to the fifty national Teachers of the Year. Thirty-five questionnaires were returned after a follow-up mailing was completed in May, 1991.

Results of the Study. Data were gathered and analyzed on the thirty-five Teachers of the Year who responded to the questionnaire. Three-fourths of the respondents were female and one-fourth were males. Approximately 57 percent were teaching at the secondary level. Their subject areas were English, social studies, science, foreign language, home economics, music, library media and learning disabilities. The 43 percent of the respondents who were elementary teachers represented all grade levels K-5 and Learning Disabilities. Years of teaching experience when selected were from five to thirty-two years in the field of education. The range of years which contained the highest number of 1991 Teachers of the Year was eleven to fifteen years.

sense of humor. Additional characteristics identified as important by elementary teachers were subject matter knowledge, commitment and being open-minded. At the secondary level, teachers identified love of children, knowledge of subject matter and communication skills as the three most important teacher characteristics. Flexibility, commitment and being open-minded were also seen as being important.

The respondents were asked to rank the ten most important tasks performed by teachers. Each task is reflective of a role of a teacher. The five roles are Skilled Instructor, Counselor, Diagnostician, Organizer-Manager, and Deliverer of Content. The most frequently chosen task by the 1991 Teachers of the Year was "challenges and motivates students to higher learning goals", a teacher as Skilled Instructor role. The ranking and roles of the next four tasks were: second, teacher as Counselor, task statement - "actively listens to student concerns and expressed needs"; third, teacher as Diagnostician, selects appropriate learning activities based on student needs and the learning situation"; fourth, teacher as Counselor, task statement - "affirms and supports students in their learning efforts; and fifth, teacher as Counselor, task statement - "helps students reflect on their thoughts and ideas".

One hundred percent of the 1991 Teachers of the Year viewed themselves as risk takers. They described their williness to make decisions, "to stick their necks out" for their students, to challenge the administration and school board and to try new ideas and materials. As one teacher related: "it is better to ask forgiveness than permission".

Over 94 percent of the respondents said that they would encourage their children to become teachers. In fact, some have children who are teachers. In addition, they overwhelmingly felt that they would become a teacher if they had it to do all over again.

Summary and Conclusions. In general, this national survey of 1991 Teachers of the Year supported the previous findings of Shanoski and Hranitz (1989, 1990). Teachers of the Year are high achievers. They have pursued thier education beyond the bachelor's degree level. They support the utilization of mentors, cooperative learning, more federal support for education, teacher empowerment, special educational programs for homeless children, multicultural education, whole language, preschools in

the public schools, a federal child care policy, a federal maternity leave policy, fifth-year teacher training and mainstreaming.

The range of grades given to their teacher preparation programs, particularly at the secondary level, merits further investigation. Establishing dialogue and collaboration between these outstanding teachers and teacher education faculty appears to be warranted. Likewise, school districts and departments of education should utilize Teachers of the Year as mentors and resource persons.

Teacher characteristics which continue to be viewed as important are love of children, subject matter knowledge and excellent communication skills. Flexibility and a sense of humor also surfaced as being desirable teacher characteristics. Teacher tasks, which were most frequently chosen, continue to emphasize the roles of the teacher as a Counselor, Skilled Instructor and Diagnostician. Responses of 1991 Teachers of the Year indicated a somewhat stronger emphasis on the role of the teacher as a Counselor. This kind of information might be of particular value to teacher educators as they examine and re-evaluate their programs. Lastly, years of experience when selected 1991 Teacher of the Year revealed a new trend which should be followed. The range of years which contained the highest numbers of teachers was 11 to 15 years.

There is a great deal we can learn from America's best teachers as we prepare for the future. Studies of Teachers of the Year can be utilized as a source of data to help guide educational practice and as a resource when making educational decisions which impact on teacher education.